

It Starts On Your Job: Syndicalist proposals

This article was first published on the US labor union website [Organizing Work](#). It is a fourth bonus article after a series of three articles about syndicalist [vision](#), [strategy](#), and [movement building](#). The fourth article is about making plans for action in individual workplaces. Thus, these articles start off on the macro level of class struggle and move down to the micro level on the job. All four are uploaded on [Libcom](#). The series of three articles were first published in the summer of 2022 on the website of US labor magazine [ASR](#). A longer version of the text below was previously published in the Swedish union paper [Arbetaren](#).



Rasmus Hästbacka of the Swedish syndicalist union [SAC](#) suggests how big and complex workplaces might be organized, using the example of a university.

Swedish and American workers face very different, yet very similar, problems. A problem in the USA is that most workers don't belong to unions and therefore cannot use unions as a resource and tool to defend their interests. A problem in Sweden is that most workers belong to unions that are so dysfunctional that it is hard or impossible to use them as a resource and tool. I have already written a piece on [why Swedish unions suck](#), so I won't repeat myself here.

In both Sweden and USA, I believe we can give the labor movement new life if we train more organizers who have a clear idea of what they can do on the job, every week, month after month. For me, organizing is about co-workers developing and using their collective strength in a systematic way.

With inspiration from the Labor Notes book [*Secrets of a Successful Organizer*](#), such a plan can be divided into four phases as follows:

1. Mapping and personal conversations
2. Making an action plan
3. Collective action
4. Evaluation

Mapping and personal conversations

The first phase is about mapping as many departments and other units as possible and having personal conversations with those workers. This is done by members who work at the units, not by external organizers. Ultimately, you need a list of all employees of the unit to be organized. Arrange meetings in your spare time. If it takes time to work through the staff, let it take time.

The purpose is to find good organizing issues in each place and find informal or natural leaders. These are employees who have influence because they enjoy the trust of colleagues.

The authors of *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* formulate what characterizes a good organizing issue:

1. Breadth: the issue engages many employees
2. Depth: the issue engages them strongly
3. The issue is winnable through pressure exerted by workers; and
4. The collective action planned has good chances of making the collective even stronger.

Write down the workplace issues that colleagues bring up, what change they want to see and which methods they are prepared to use to pressure management. Note who the key people are, the informal “leaders” that others mention by name. Personal conversations build good relationships and encourage colleagues to participate in union work and education.

Second phase

Once you have found a good organizing issue and a concrete demand to gather co-workers around, then it is time to make an action plan. The plan must state how the demand should be presented and what pressure should be used if the bosses reject your demand. It needs to be made clear who is doing what and in what order. Crucial to the success of the action plan is that the informal leaders are with you.

In choosing methods of pressure, it is important to choose methods that are both effective and that many employees are willing to use. A majority of the staff should want to participate or at least support the methods. You need not be fixated on strikes or other varieties of economic

pressure. There is also moral, psychological and legal pressure. I and a fellow union comrade have written an article about just that, [alternatives to striking](#).

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Third phase

The third phase is collective action. Before implementing an action plan, the co-workers should have discussed the support needed from the syndicalist section. Decisions should also have been made if you want to cooperate with other unions or act independently of them. A general advice is to be open to cooperation with other unions but clear on the conditions: that the campaign is controlled by workers on the shop floor.

It is not until organizers have talked to all their colleagues and the staff has gathered around an action plan that it becomes of great value. The planned collective methods create pressure at the bargaining table. Without a plan for collective action, it will be a battle of words and the law; such battles usually bring meagre or no results.

Fourth phase

The fourth and final phase is evaluation. The authors of *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* emphasize that evaluation is as important as the previous phases. To evaluate is not just to tick a box about whether your demand was met or not. Co-workers should evaluate their ability to act together, i.e. discuss strengths and weaknesses, in order to develop the capacity for the next battle. After the evaluation, the four phases can be repeated with a focus on new organizing issues and so on.

Example of a successful campaign

When I worked at the university in the city of Umeå, the staff at two departments (Law and Political Science) managed to stop a stupid reorganization and push several bosses to resign prematurely. The reorganization was about merging the two departments into one, based on the odd idea that bigger is always better. The methods we used were: petition, open questioning at staff meetings, and boycott of a series of meaningless meetings. At the Department of Law, we arranged an advisory vote on the boss of the department. The boss received very few votes and was replaced by a candidate who received a clear majority of the votes.

Two of us in the departments in question were members of SAC. We used regular meetings for syndicalists outside our departments as a coaching and sounding board. Members of other unions got no support at all from their own unions.

Even though we won the conflict, no formal structure was created. This made the conflict unnecessarily protracted and cumbersome. If we had formed a better structure, I believe we would have won quicker and had the opportunity to reflect and further develop our collective power.

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Formal structure is necessary for employees to be able to make and implement democratic decisions and bridge the ups and downs of activity and of various individuals' commitment. So in the rest of this article, I'd like to reflect on how the *Secrets* approach could be developed on a broader scale in Swedish workplaces where not all workers are members of the same union, using a syndicalist approach.

A syndicalist approach

Members of the Swedish syndicalist union SAC form local job branches called *sections*. At present, Swedish syndicalists have formed sections at four universities. On campuses, syndicalist sections usually hold meetings on at least two different levels: general section meetings for all members employed by the university, and meetings for individual departments or other units.

For a syndicalist section, it is natural to form these subdivisions at individual units as soon as the section has recruited groups of members there. The purpose of a subdivision is to promote the ability of colleagues to stick together and act together. The purpose of the section is to coordinate all subdivisions in joint action.

Let's say we have a section that holds general meetings for members at a university, but not yet meetings at individual units. Such a section can start by arranging a meeting for all members who want to organize their own unit or support others who organize. At this meeting, the four phases of organizing can be discussed. In the continued work, these meetings can serve as support and sounding board for everyone who is organizing.

What kind of unions?

If SAC and other unions train more organizers, I hope we will build worker-run unions. More precisely, hope lies in formal unions that welcome workers in general. I call them [popular movement unions](#).

If you want to get started with organizing, I highly recommend reading *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* and discussing it with your co-workers. The book is both in-depth and easy to read. The authors provide, for example, step-by-step guides for personal conversations and mapping

the workplace. Readers receive solid advice on how workers can win conflicts, but also advice on how to deal with apathy and disappointments.

If workers build popular movement unions, then we have a chance to start moving towards [a new society](#).

Rasmus Hästbacka

Rasmus Hästbacka is a lawyer and has been a member of the Umeå Local of SAC since 1997. He is the author of the book (free online) [Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice](#).